

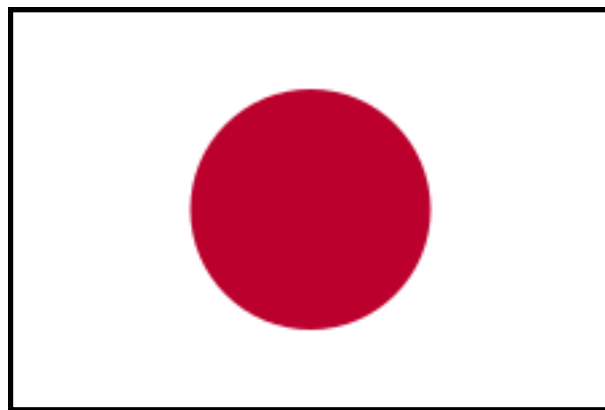
## Remembering War's End: The Politics of Memory in East Asia

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2015 marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Japan's surrender at the end of the Second World War. In 1995, then-Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama made a [famous speech](#) atoning for Japan's wartime actions, expressing remorse for 'a mistaken national policy' of militarism and the destruction it engendered. Known as the 'Murayama Statement,' it has represented Japan's official position toward the war for nearly two decades.

However, current Prime Minister Shinzō Abe takes a different view of Japan's wartime past. How he chooses to interpret his nation's history will not only have immediate political implications for bilateral relations in the region, but also may hint at his broader policy agenda and how transformative his premiership will be for Japan.

Abe's rightist and nationalist Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has [challenged US textbook publishers](#) over the issue of 'comfort women'— abductees forced into sexual slavery in wartime military brothels — and considers the depiction of the issue to be an 'infringement upon the human rights of Japanese children living in the United States.' The LDP also wants to [reverse a number of constitutional changes](#) brought about after the Second World War by restoring the emperor as head of state, replacing the current *Nisshōki* flag with its 'Rising Sun' predecessor, and amending Article 9 to allow greater flexibility in security policy.



'Nisshōki' Flag in Official Usage (Source: Wikipedia)



'Rising Sun' Variant Naval Ensign (Source:Wikipedia)

Abe's 2013 visit to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates Japanese war dead — including 14 Class A war criminals — was described by the [US embassy in Tokyo](#) as 'an action that will exacerbate tensions with Japan's neighbours.' After Abe sent an offering to the shrine, and a number of cabinet members visited last year, [a Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson declared](#) that the Japanese government demonstrated a 'wrongful attitude towards historical issues.' South Korea released a [press statement](#) asserting that the action 'glorifies Japan's war of aggression and forcible colonization of the Korean Peninsula' and was 'nullifying the basis of Japan's post-war return to the international community.'

The issue has been in the minds of both Abe and the Japanese public for some time. In a 2012 interview with the conservative *Sankei Shimbun*, Abe asserted that the Murayama Statement should only be considered the view of a single Socialist Party prime minister at a given point in history and expressed his personal wish to '[issue a forward-looking statement that is appropriate for the 21st century](#).' This prompted an immediate backlash from both the LDP's junior coalition partner, Komeito, and the main opposition party, the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). [Komeito leader Natsuo Yamaguchi](#) emphasised the importance of continuing to acknowledge 'deep remorse' and to offer a 'heartfelt apology' for 'colonial rule and aggression.' The DPJ's Katsuya Okada asserted it was 'unforgivable' of Abe to portray the statement as 'too detailed' and in need of revision.

Reactions abroad were even stronger. In China, a [commentary piece](#) released by the Xinhua state news service declared that any major revision of the Murayama Statement would 'shake the foundation for Japan's return to the international community and

reconciliation with countries that had suffered seriously from its wartime atrocities.’ At a [press conference](#), a South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson asserted that Japan should ‘squarely face up to its history’ and emulate the ‘consistent atonement and remorse’ expressed by German politicians at the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary memorial of the liberation of Auschwitz.

Although it seems that Abe is undaunted in his desire to issue a revisionist text more palatable to nationalist audiences, the backlash has made it clear that every word will be parsed and have consequences for Japan’s relationship with allies and neighbours. The United States has [reportedly](#) entered into the process and will issue a joint document in late April or early May with Japan, emphasising the importance of historical sensitivity for the sake of good relations among allies. This joint document will also reportedly call for a restrained response by China and South Korea to any perceived slights.

Abe has sought to downplay the controversy in recent days and has assembled a 16-person ‘Advisory Panel on the History of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and on Japan’s Role and the World Order in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’ to discuss the issue. [At its first meeting](#), Abe requested that participants focus on five key areas:

- Lessons to be learned from Japan’s 20<sup>th</sup> century history
- Japan’s path after the Second World War
- Reconciliation with the US, Australia, China, South Korea, and others
- Japan’s regional and global role for the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- Policy recommendations in light of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the war’s end

This all goes to show that the interpretation of Japan’s wartime past plays on the historical sensitivities, within domestic politics and in the region. With the anniversary mere months away, Abe faces a significant choice in balancing contrition with national pride. Will he adopt a more conciliatory attitude toward Korea and China by issuing a statement similar to those made by his predecessors? Or will he express a new vision of Japan’s role in the region and the world that will resonate with nationalists at home?